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# The lapsed and the laity: discipline and lenience in the study of religion

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This article cautions against an ‘earnest turn’ within the anthropology of religion, pointing up the tendency for anthropologists of religion to over-emphasize the role of discipline in the construction of the religious subjecthood over mechanisms of leniency and compromise. Taking the Catholic Church as an example, I show how discipline *and* lenience have been co-constitutive of Christian subjectivities, as different movements in a gigantic choreography which have spanned and evolved over several centuries. By looking at certain technologies of lenience that have emerged over the course of Catholic history, I trace an alternative genealogy of ‘the Christian self’; one in which institutional growth, power, and survival depended not only upon the formation of disciplined bodies and interior dispositions but also upon a carefully managed division of labour between clergy and laity, as well as upon a battery of legal commutations and practical avoidances aimed at minimizing the effort and pain of the ascetic approach. Taking the concept of ‘lapsedness’ as cue, I ask to what extent the ‘lapsed Catholic’, rather than indexing an ever-increasing tendency towards secularism, might already be contained and accounted for within Catholicism as a living, evolving form.

Dona Leeta,<sup>1</sup> a landless fieldworker and a single mother from northeast Brazil, was somewhere in her fifties. She smoked a lot, joked a lot, but had always worked hard to sustain her household of five. In 2012 I walked the long uphill path to visit her again. It had been several years since we had seen one another, and suddenly there she was, barefoot and smiling in the doorway. Dona Leeta’s smile was so wide and warm it embraced me in greeting halfway down the hill. As I drew nearer, she came out to see me and immediately I noticed that she was wearing a loose black dress. Having no recollection of her ever having worn black before, my curiosity was sparked. ‘Oh this!’ she chuckled raspily, grabbing me by the arm and leading me up the slope. ‘This . . .’, Dona Leeta’s chuckle turned into rhythmic laughing and then, as she tried to recompose herself, a hacking cough. ‘This dress, a promise to Santa Quiteria from when I broke my leg. I have to wear black for a year. My niece prayed on my behalf, as I was a

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*crente* [Protestant Evangelical] at the time. And Santa Quiteria fixed it, so now here I am repaying the debt!

'But Dona Leeta, I puzzled 'Are you still a *crente*?' 'No', she replied:

I was trying it out – I liked the music. But then Santa Quiteria interceded, you know, so I came back to being Catholic. Truth is I didn't get on with the *crentes*. All those hours in the church, all those testimonies going on all night long, it's just not for me.

Reflecting on my visit to Dona Leeta that day, I wonder where that rasping explanation would fit within current anthropological discussions of religious subjectivity, for it is hard not to notice that the anthropology of religion has taken a rather earnest turn of late. Within the anthropology of Christianity and Islam in particular, a good deal of attention has been paid to questions of religious subjectivity, particularly in relation to the complex world-making practices of individuals who strive for piety and perhaps achieve it, or strive despite falling constantly short of the mark. The sense that we get from all this is that religion in general – far from disappearing into the secular black hole that was predicted long ago – is very much on the modern political agenda, generating studies and grant proposals at a healthy rate because, for its various practitioners, its propositional content really matters. From Saba Mahmood's (2005) pious Islamic women and Ayala Fader's (2009) self-vigilant Hasidic mothers to Omri Elisha's (2011) 'morally ambitious' neoliberal Evangelicals and Tanya Luhrmann's (2012) devoutly studious Christians, there has been a proliferation of studies on people whose religiosity seems to require exceptionally high levels of conscious, individual reflection and personal time commitment. There have been far fewer studies about religion's softer, secularized edges, where 'good enough' religious subjects negotiate lives comparatively free of self-questioning and ritual engagement. Notable interventions have been made by Samuli Schielke (2012), who points, contra Mahmood, to the multiple ways in which it is possible to be a non-believing Muslim in Egypt; and by Lois Lee (2015) and Matthew Engelke (2012), whose work in England draws attention to subtler, more 'ambient' forms of religious and even non-religious subjectivity. We have also seen some productive discussions of 'godless' people (Blanes & Oustinova-Stjepanovic 2015), and promising explorations of doubt as 'ideas in action' (Pelkmans 2013). But in many of these works a certain earnestness remains: the job of the anthropologist seems invariably to be one of showing how much conscious self-cultivating work goes into being a doubter, an atheist, or a non-believer. The possibility of being mechanically, or even institutionally, doubtful, or indifferently irreligious, remains underexplored.

Although consciously self-cultivating Catholics – not to mention studies of them – do exist, it is also fairly axiomatic that Catholicism as a marker of identity is not always and everywhere primarily about 'belief' or even practice *over* belief. The range of descriptors applied to Catholics provides an interesting reference point. One hears, for example, of 'lapsed Catholics', 'non-practising Catholics', 'cultural Catholics', 'cradle Catholics', and 'nominal Catholics'. Such denotations belie the fact that Catholicism is open to identifications that index aspects of personhood beyond religious belief: kinship, territoriality, ethnicity, belonging; identifications that remain variously distanced, critical, and uncertain with regard to Catholicism's key propositional content (see Mayblin, Norget, & Napolitano 2017).

Even so, why do non-believing, religiously indifferent, and ritually disengaged Catholics retain their Catholicism, becoming *lapsed Catholics*, whereas non-believing

and religiously indifferent Protestants tend simply to cease being Christian altogether? If ever there was a need to take something ‘seriously’, the anthropology of Christianity is certainly facing it: the legions of people who describe themselves as ‘lapsed’ or ‘nominal’ or ‘not particularly committed’ Christians; the legions who populate the fringes of this great umbrella denoted as a world religion. We need a better understanding, I suggest, of the many subjects out there who carry their Christianity lightly and who, in turn, are carried lightly from the cradle to the grave by Christian structures and traditions. We have been failing to account for these types of Christians. Although we may have been interested in them for reasons other than ‘religion’, we have failed to consider what their indeterminate positionality in relation to Christian ideals and rituals reveals about Christianity itself.

This article is not an attempt to counterpose myself to an anthropology of Christianity ‘*for itself*’, as Joel Robbins (2003) once called for, as my interest in the lapsed Catholic has undoubtedly emerged directly in light of such conversations. But it is an attempt to shift the focus of such conversations, from piety and conscious self-cultivation in relation to God to indifference and ‘lapsedness’. For a long time now I have worked with Catholics in Brazil and elsewhere, and while pretty much all my informants over the years would describe themselves as Catholic Christians, the majority never really fitted, nor did they consciously strive to fit, the ‘pious’ Christian mould. Indeed, where Robbins set off to ignore the committed Christians and was forced in the end to acknowledge them, I partially set out to find them and, when this proved fruitless, was forced to think through what it was I had found instead. In each case, it could be said, a similar kind of movement had to occur, from theoretical intention, to ethnographic finding, and outwards again.

It is worth noting that the emergence of a self-conscious anthropology of Christianity was premised primarily on studies of Pentecostal Christianity and, in particular, conversion, and was thus to a certain extent predisposed to focus on committed believers (Cannell 2006; Harding 2001; Robbins 2003).<sup>2</sup> It is perhaps little wonder then that the anthropology of Christianity has had so little to say about the lapsed and the indifferent, as these kinds of Christians were never, by and large, its focus. Yet, on the other hand, neither was Catholicism as a particular kind of Christianity – at least in those earlier agenda-setting days. So, in returning to the title of this article, my general quest is to understand how we might approach Catholics who call themselves – or are referred to by others as – ‘lapsed’.<sup>3</sup>

Lapsedness, like piety, is not an objectively measurable state so much as a category that accrues meaning only in relation to its culturally elaborated opposite. Thus, one person’s (or cultural group’s) ‘lapsed’ is as likely to be another’s ‘observant’. Moreover, a lapsed disposition towards Catholicism, like any disposition, needs to be ‘read’ in relation to the specificities of the cultural and historical context that produced it. A rural Brazilian fieldworker’s manner of ‘lapsing’ is going to differ in subtle but important ways from that of an urban, middle-class North American, but that does not mean that we cannot investigate the concept of lapsedness more generally. Vernacularized denotations for the ‘lapsed Catholic’ can be found in many languages, and the fact that the term appears with increasing frequency in the popular Catholic media points to the fact that it is widely recognized by Catholics themselves as a curious (and occasionally troublesome) feature of their contemporary faith (see Phillips 2015).

Although terms such as ‘lapsed’ play upon idealist notions of the perfect Christian and already imply a reformist worldview, critique is not my intention. My goal is to

explain how what some might interpret as lapsedness comes to make sense within a Christian framework, and why, therefore, we should include these kinds of Christians within our 'religion' focus. The argument I will present is coterminous with thoughts and analyses that I, along with ethnographers of Catholic and Orthodox Christian contexts, have been developing elsewhere (Bandak & Boylston 2014; Malara n.d.; Mayblin *et al.* 2017), although in this article a large part of my argument will rest on secondary historical sources on Catholic indulgences and the emergence of saints' cults in Western Europe from late antiquity until the late Middle Ages.

This broadly defined period was an era of prolific expansion for Christianity, insofar as it was an era in which Christian infrastructure was burgeoning and becoming ever more centralized. We might think of this as a time in which Christianity was reaching into souls at an unprecedented rate, as a time of discipline *par excellence*, when, as Talal Asad (1993) has argued, the apparatus of Christianity extended its remit from collective politics to the disciplining of individual subjectivities. But I want to suggest that the geographical encompassment and political success of Latin Christendom in this period is better accounted for if we focus a lens on Christian technologies of leniency.<sup>4</sup> By looking at certain devotional practices that were at their height during this historical period, such as the indulgence – a practice which came, post-Reformation, to stand for the very opposite of sincerity and discipline – and exploring them in relation to contemporary Catholic understandings of spiritual labour and spiritual intention as divisible within a collective, and of sacramental ritual as 'quasi-magical' in operation, it becomes possible to see how concepts of lapsedness (of slippage, of being *at one remove* from pious observance) may already be well encompassed and accounted for within the Catholic life-world.

## Discipline

To speak of discipline is, at first blush, to conjure up a sense of teleology. Always oriented towards some goal, discipline is never purposeless; it is always in aid of something: it exists, in contemporary social theory, to serve the interests of power or, in Christian terms, to enable a cultivation of the soul. Consider Weber's Calvinists, whose restless inner-worldly asceticism and economic productivity would prove their standing among the elect. Those early German capitalists were the embodiment of Christian discipline, a discipline that, we are told, not only ushered in the spirit of modern capitalism, but also produced, in Weber's words, 'unprecedented inner loneliness of the single individual' (2002 [1905]: 104).

Discipline as a process that ceaselessly moulds and imprints itself on the subject reappears in the works of Foucault, who gives us not only the 'birth of the prison', but also the birth of the modern subject. In the modes in which it organizes populations, and the corresponding effect on human subjects, we discover that subjects are not born; they are formed, to a large extent, by discipline. In his classic work *Discipline and punish* (1995), we are shown how the concerted distribution of bodies, surfaces, lights, and gazes arranges us. We learn how the organization of space, architecture, rules, and machineries creates self-regulating dispositions resulting in masses of subjects unaware, or perhaps only partially aware, of their own complicity in power's production. In Foucault's vision, society looks like a stick of Brighton Rock, with the word 'discipline' going all the way through it.

This image of discipline as a ceaseless, powerful process of subject formation continues in an influential way, at least as far as the anthropology of religion is concerned,

with Talal Asad (1993). Asad returns us to the cloister of Latin Christendom, to see how judicial torture and religious pain worked to produce 'truthful discourses' that made subjects respond to authority. For Asad is interested in the power of coercive Christian rituals like confession to produce certain 'potentialities' – individual, social, and cultural – that helped to define and form specific types of Christian consciousness. In chapter 4 of *Genealogies* he guides us through a veritable cornucopia of documents and treatises developed in the twelfth century; scrolls and writings that probed the nature of the soul, and that sought to define sin in order to better categorize it. As with Foucault, Asad points out how actions came to be separated from desires, and actual crimes from inner predispositions. From public trial to private penance, he singles out the body in pain as the locus of truth. The disciplined body, whether flogged or forced into crouching on a flagstone floor to hear confession, becomes, with Asad, the 'microcosm of social subjection'. The message: Christian forms of discipline were the means by which Christian communities came to be subjectified in determinate ways. Thanks to confession and other programmatic forms of penance, a specific type of Christian consciousness came into being.

The idea that discipline – whether in the form of 'techniques of the self', 'knowledge', or 'discourse' – is both the spark and engine of all Western forms of subjectivity worries me, because it writes the lapsed and the indifferent out of Christian history. Asad's inspiration came not from the laity but from monastic practices – from what the clerical orders did. Within this theory of the development of a Christian 'self', it is implicitly assumed that the laity followed suit or were forced to live in an endless cycle of aspiration to monastic ideals, even though they were doomed by the practicalities of ordinary life to failure. However, we also know that by the twelfth century the distinction between clergy and laity was well established, and that the rules for each class were already understood, at least on some levels, to be different. We can also reasonably suppose that by this point in the development of Christianity, the relationship between the clergy and the laity was not perceived as one of simple and straightforward moral exemplarity. Exemplarity may have been one dimension of that relationship, but as the medieval historian Alexander Murray points out, much of the priest-lay interface was 'economic and social: a matter of tithes, rents and meetings in the street' (2015: 89).

One of the key defining elements of Catholicism, as opposed to many Protestant and non-conformist Christian traditions, is its enshrined division of labour between clergy and laity. In its simplest terms, Catholicism is ordered by a priestly caste, an ordained elite who preside over the sacraments, and a caste of followers, who worship and receive those sacraments. In the case of Catholicism, a priest is made through the sacrament of ordination, a charismatic ritual that confers on the ordinand an 'indelible stain'. An ordination, thus, is not merely a symbolic rite of passage from one status to another; it effects a deep ontological change in a man's nature. In ordination a priest's body is mysteriously altered for ever in a way that is irreversible. Ordination confers upon him the charism of office, which in turn validates his concelebration of the Mass.

The priest mediates the laity's access to the divine through his liturgical knowledge, his encompassment within the church as a 'total institution', indeed through his actual and physical body. Yet another way – and perhaps a more precise (for this context) way – to frame it would be in terms of 'labour service': that is, quantifiable hours a priest expends in ritual service to others. Put bluntly, a mediation focus alone, emphasizing the priest's exclusive control of the Eucharist, tends invariably to lead to a somewhat Lutheran line of questioning. (Why should priests alone have this special access to

God?) A different pathway opens up when we approach the system through a Marxist lens, but with priests as a kind of proletariat labouring for the benefit of the lay class. For one thing, a sense of ritual labour as serious, time-consuming work is indicated (albeit indirectly) by the canon law concerning mandatory celibacy. Canon 277 states:

Clerics are obliged to observe perfect and perpetual continence for the sake of the kingdom of heaven and therefore are obliged to observe celibacy, which is a special gift of God, by which sacred ministers can adhere more easily to Christ with an undivided heart and can more freely dedicate themselves to the service of God and humankind.

Chastity and virginity as a way of life in this context is justified not, as it is in other traditions, according to ancient rules of cultic purity, but according to relational ideals. The aim, in sum, is the undivided heart. A celibate priest is theoretically freer than the average married man to work the number of hours demanded of him by the Lord. As Pope Benedict XVI declared in a 2012 address to priests in a Mass convened in remembrance of the vows they made in ordination: 'No one should ever have the impression that we work conscientiously when on duty, but before and after hours we belong only to ourselves. A priest never belongs to himself' (Benedict XVI 2012). At the risk of pointing out the obvious, we should note the assumptions built into such a system. Clearly the priesthood isn't for everyone, and because it isn't and couldn't be for everyone, neither, by definition, is hard spiritual graft for everyone. Pushing the point, one theologian, in a treatise on the theology of the laity, writes:

To all would-be ecclesiastical levellers, I would say: 'Return, with an open mind and heart, to the Gospels'. Consider the concentric circles round Our Lord in the sixth chapter of St Luke's Gospel. First, there is the 'great multitude' who press hard to hear and to be healed by Him (cf. v.17); then there is 'the great crowd of his disciples' (ibid), those who follow Him more closely; finally, chosen from his disciples, are the twelve men, with Peter at their head, whom Jesus appoints as Apostles after a night of prayer to the Father (cf vv.12ff) (Saward 2003).

In Catholicism, to be a layman is thus to be part of that 'great multitude' who, although non-appointed by Jesus for ministry, are chosen for other tasks, such as marriage and sexual reproduction. It is in this fundamental division of the visible church into the ordained and the laity that a certain absolution from the performance of spiritual and theological tasks is justified on one side.

In their analytical foray into Orthodox religious worlds and their particularities, Andreas Bandak and Tom Boylston (2014) have described this form of organization as a 'community of deferral'. In Orthodox, Catholic, and other heavily institutional forms of Christianity, they argue, the division of spiritual labour between priests, lay, and other religious virtuosi distributes the burden of piety and religious knowledge, and one of the key points about this deferral is that it affords some individuals a more passive role in religious practice. Rather than striving for correctness, subjects may orient themselves towards a 'lack of incorrectness' without sacrificing their claim to Christian identity. There is an obvious but important point in all this, and we see it particularly in relation to Catholicism: far from being an 'impossible religion' in Hegel's sense, lay Catholicism is, in theory, an infinitely do-able religion precisely because it does not exact high levels of reflexive certainty from each individual, or at least from each individual *all of the time* (Cannell 2005; Hegel 1975 [1807]). Although this deferral of piety variously implies a deferral to the expertise of a priestly caste who will do it better on your behalf, or a temporal deferral, as in: the time for me to be pious is later on ('when I'm older, or on my deathbed', etc.), an ethos of commutation via deferral remains key. Either way,



an affordance opens up, making it possible for an individual to remain at one remove from Christianity's key propositions.

We see this ethos of deferral at work in a different way when lay Catholics divide spiritual labour among themselves, often along axes of gender and generation (Christian 1972; Rogers 2009). In many such practices what we see is not merely a division of ritual labour but even, in some instances, a division of agentive responsibility in relation to the divine. Consider, for example, the Mexican and Peruvian procession-goers in Napolitano's (2015) study, carrying heavy effigies on behalf of themselves and their families. Or Sara, a 23-year-old pilgrim in Elaine Peña's (2011) study on transnational (Mexico-US) devotion to the Virgin of Guadalupe; Sara performs pilgrimage wearing a white T-shirt covered in hand-written requests for protection from friends and relatives unable to make the journey themselves. In such cases one pilgrim's body literally carries the intentions of many other individuals.

When it comes to the circulation of holy objects and substances, we see a system in which grace has the capacity to 'mind jump' – in short, to work outside of an individual's conscious awareness. Consider, for example, Hillary Kaell's (2012) North American pilgrims to the Holy Land, whose obsessive shopping for souvenirs to give out to their grandchildren is ultimately an attempt to encompass their descendants, with or without their conscious acceptance, within an overall economy of divine materiality and spiritual salvation. In the rural Northeast Brazilian context where I worked, mothers sometimes slipped prayer cards or the images of saints into the back pockets of Catholic but church-shy teenage sons without their knowledge. More than simply praying for the welfare of someone other than oneself, such practices may be part of a system in which spiritual intentionality *itself* is regularly delegated to one person within a household or community. Take the case of Seu Zé from my own field-site.<sup>5</sup> One day in 2012, driving back from an interview with a priest, I saw Seu Zé on the side of the road and offered him a lift back to the village. To pass the journey I initiated conversation by mentioning that I had just been to visit the local priest for my research. Seu Zé nodded and made polite, enthusiastic noises but did not offer any conversation in return. 'Are you much of a church-goer yourself, Seu Zé?' I tried again. 'Me? Not personally, no', he replied; 'the wife, she takes care of all that stuff. Seu Zé sat back with a smile and looked out of the window, perfectly content. By praying on behalf of her husband, Seu Zé's wife could be seen as one out of a number of links in a much larger mediating chain between him and God. Other links would, in this particular ethnographic context, be likely to include Seu Zé's own mother (see Mayblin 2012), his baptismal God parents (see Mayblin 2014), his local parish priest, a house saint (see Mayblin 2014), a locally venerated saint, a nationally venerated saint, and the Virgin Mary.

In the cases just mentioned we see spiritual dividends accruing to some individuals at a rate much greater than the effort they, personally, have put into acquiring them. Are Sara's relatives, who signed her T-shirt, and Seu Zé, who let his wife do all the praying on his behalf, what we would call 'lapsed' Christians? Yes, if by lapsed we mean that they do not devote their own time and energy to spiritual tasks, but not doing spiritual tasks oneself does not necessarily signify an absence of faith, nor does it mean an absence of concern about whether the designated person is doing the tasks properly. As Bandak and Boylston have argued, even the common enough presence of outright anti-clericalism in Catholic and Orthodox communities does not necessarily equal a position outside the church:



[M]ore often it represents a dispute from different perspectives within a Church more broadly construed. It is often not the case that the clergy seeks to impose orthodoxy and the people respond with looser, devotional, 'popular' counter-practices. Very often what the laity seeks is to be orthodox, to see things done properly (2014: 28).

The sharing of prayer, penance, and pilgrimage among family members is widely observed in Catholic communities and also in other Orthodox traditions. We might think of such sharing as a devotional tradition-cum-'technology' that encompasses the maximum number of individuals within an overarching cosmic framework with the minimum of effort. We might further recognize this as a technology of lenience, one which allows some subjects to inhabit dispositions that are variously distanced or obviating in relation to God, without losing out entirely on the potential blessings that He may have to distribute.

Technologies of leniency are interesting from an institutional perspective because they distend the possibilities of cosmic encompassment. They maximize participation by harnessing the intentional engagements of an elite pool of 'confessed and contrite' individuals. In the following section, my aim is to point to the recurring presence (and possible functions) of disciplinary lenience in Catholic histories of ritual by looking, first, at confession, and, second, at the indulgence.

### Confession

Despite the introduction, in the thirteenth century, of a canon law decreeing that all Catholic Christians had to confess to a parish priest once a year, there is little evidence that lay Christians obeyed this mandate. Indeed, evidence points to the fact that they did not, and that confession remained for a long time, and despite pastoral efforts to the contrary, a purely monastic concern (Schaffern 1998).

During the Counter-Reformation, confession was commuted into a private act, and from that moment onwards the official recommendations around it remained fairly steady, at least until the early twentieth century, when, under Pope Pius X (1903-14), there was a sudden renewed spike in disciplinary fervour, with the laity suddenly having to confess weekly rather than once a year, and children, who had never been expected to confess before, having to confess regularly from first communion onwards (Cornwell 2014). It would be easy to assume that here we have, in Asad's words, power, working to produce 'truthful discourses' through an increase in that 'collaborative activity that sustained the authority relationship between priest and penitent' (1993: 103).

Yet, a glance at canon law relating to confession presents a different angle on the same theme: rather than a series of tightenings around the confessional repertoire (lengthening the time spent performing it, etc.), we see a series of modifiers and contractions. These relaxations of discipline – the legal crevices that came to be – are as important to the story as discipline's original instigation.

To give an example of some of these modifications:

- Early rules stipulated that ministration of last rites by an ordained priest was essential for any Christian who hoped to go to heaven. Later on, exceptions had to be written in for knights and soldiers, who were highly unlikely to know the hour of their death.
- Early confessions carried harsh penances that would take a lifetime to work off. Later penances became shorter and easier to complete.
- Early confession involved three stages: confession and receipt of penance; payment of penance in daily life outside the confessional; return to the priest for absolution.

Later confessions were less protracted and involved two stages: first, confession and receipt of absolution; second payment of penance.

Were we to approach these modifiers from a Foucauldian perspective, we would most probably view them as part of a gradual shift towards governmentality, or 'self-government' through increasingly sophisticated forms of inter-subjective discourse. In this view, any lessening of public discipline would be counterbalanced by an increase in an individual's capacity for corrective self-reproach. Discipline is thus seen as never decreasing, but merely mutating its form. But such an approach can easily overestimate the penetration of these norms into individual subjectivity when they may well have remained a relatively surface-level phenomenon. In other words, this view forecloses the possibility of institutional growth in the face of some degree of imperviousness among the population to the truth claims of the church.

Again, I am not arguing, contra Asad (1993: chap. 4), that disciplinary practice has not been important in the formation of the Christian self, I am simply suggesting (a) that Asad's argument relies for its rhetorical force on the idealized, transcribed, prescriptive practices of a very small percentage of ascetic medieval Christians; and (b) that an over-emphasis on practices of truth-making through rituals like confession may cause us to overlook technologies that worked to encompass the opaque soul, or that worked 'mechanistically' regardless of individual intention.

As David Graeber (2012) has shown, bureaucracy tends to breed 'dead zones of the imagination', producing, in other words, behaviour that, despite its inherent simplicity (and apparent stupidity), is nevertheless extremely effective. Anthropologists should not, he warns, confuse interpretative depth with social significance. What Graeber has in mind here is physical violence and the manner in which anthropologists in the past have striven to interpret its deep cultural meanings and poetic dimensions. It is not, he argues, that violence does not contain such dimensions. The problem is the anthropological proclivity to mistake violence's most interesting dimensions for its most important ones. Violence, in its lack of interpretative depth, 'may well be the only form of human action by which it is possible to have relatively predictable effects on the actions of a person about whom you understand nothing' (Graeber 2012: 116). Hi-jacking this line of argument, I believe that anthropologists of religion, too, are in danger of mistaking religion's most interesting dimensions for its most important ones. That religious 'selves' are produced through disciplinary processes, or that they emerge at tangential (ethical) angles from given structures of morality, may be interesting, but such observations cannot, alone, explain how Catholicism came to be the Western world's largest, most powerful, and most encompassing of institutions. To understand this, we need some appreciation of how an institution can have, to paraphrase Graeber, relatively predictable effects on the actions of people it knows nothing about. We need, I would argue, an appreciation of technologies that thrive on blind spots, that are effective in the absence of knowledge. In sum we need a more nuanced understanding of discipline's others: of leniency, vacuity, and indiscipline.

### **The indulgence**

An instructive case study in this regard is the indulgence. The indulgence, as we know it, is an official document granting the bearer full or partial remission of punishment for sin, typically in the form of years off the total amount of time that will be spent upon death in purgatory. At its core, the indulgence is based on the theological notion

of a Treasury of Merit – which we might imagine as a kind of supernatural reservoir containing all the merit in the world built up over time by Jesus and, through him, the Virgin Mary and all the saints.

In the words of the Catechism of the Catholic Church:

The 'Treasury of the Church' is the infinite value, which can never be exhausted, which Christ's merits have before God. They were offered so that the whole of mankind could be set free from sin and attain communion with the Father. In Christ, the Redeemer himself, the satisfactions and merits of his Redemption exist and find their efficacy. This treasury includes as well the prayers and good works of the Blessed Virgin Mary. They are truly immense, unfathomable, and even pristine in their value before God. In the treasury, too, are the prayers and good works of all the saints, all those who have followed in the footsteps of Christ the Lord and by his grace have made their lives holy and carried out the mission in the unity of the Mystical Body.

Because such a treasury exists, the church can intervene on behalf of individual sinners and use it to support the commutation of their sins. Only office-bearers can grant indulgences (bishops and prelates); even the most holy of men and women as charismatic individuals have no authority to draw from the treasury on behalf of others. Indulgences are conditional on an individual's possession of an appropriate inner disposition (being 'confessed and contrite'), plus their willingness to perform good works. What counts as a 'good work' will vary. It may be active service, such as building a cathedral, fighting a crusade, or donating one's money for these purposes. It might be the performance of some pious devotion, such as the reciting of psalms and the offering up of prayers – what Giorgio Agamben (2011 [2007]) would describe as the all-important work of 'glory' through acclamation. It might include pilgrimage to a newly founded holy site, accompanying a saint's procession, or hosting a feast in honour of that saint. Indulgences have also long been extended to objects of piety, relics and the like, that have been properly blessed by priests, bishops, and pontiffs.

The principle of commutation here is key; by receiving an indulgence, one's sins are not 'paid off', but rather one's penance is commuted, that is, made less severe by being transformed from one form of payment to another. Commutation is geared ultimately towards time off in purgatory. Hence if, for a Catholic, reciting one Hail Mary before going to bed achieves five minutes off purgatory, reciting one Hail Mary on an indulged feast day whilst sitting in a prescribed chapel achieves the normal five minutes off purgatory plus an extra ten years, thanks to the church's drawing upon the infinite Treasury of Merit. The whole process is a bit like when your employer 'matches' whatever contribution you choose to make to your pension.

In 1999, Pope John Paul II described the indulgence as

the expression of the Church's full confidence of being heard by the Father when – in view of Christ's merits and, by his gift, those of Our Lady and the saints – she asks him to mitigate or cancel the painful aspect of punishment by fostering its medicinal aspect through other channels of grace (John Paul II 1999).

The notion of Christ's forgiveness is, of course, a central tenet – indeed, *the* central tenet – of Christianity. But what is interesting about the indulgence is that it takes this forgiveness to a bureaucratized extreme, one in which the non-reciprocal nature of Christ's forgiveness of sins – non-reciprocal in the sense that it does not depend on our merit – is replaced with forgiveness as a calculated reciprocal transaction. The indulgence thus serves less as a charism – a gift out of nowhere – than as a

technology of predictability. Through indulgences and other institutional technologies central to Catholic faith, Christians don't simply receive forgiveness, they may compel it.

Historically, there have been various forms and incarnations of the indulgence – too many to document here. Shortly I will turn to look at the medieval indulgence, but before doing so it is important to stress that what passed for an indulgence up until the sixteenth century was rather different from what passes for an indulgence today. Over the centuries the indulgence has undergone radical reform from within the church, and continues to be debated, amended, refined, and updated. In the 1999 edition of the *Manual of Indulgences*, the rules are laid out in clear, precise, and legalistic fashion. Theologically the same principle of the Treasury of Merit applies, but the nature of the indulgence has changed. For example:

- The church itself can receive none of the money proffered by indulgence seekers in lieu of 'good works'. Monetary donations are not mentioned in the latest official manual at all, but in practice may conceivably count as good works so long as they are directed towards charity.
- The mathematical register that was used to help people make sense of indulgences has also all but disappeared. Indulgences are either 'partial' or 'plenary' but are no longer quantifiable in terms of a precise number of years, hours, or days off purgatory. A bit of maths is still allowed, however, because if a plenary indulgence is attempted and only half-completed, a partial indulgence may still be granted.
- The production of certificates containing images of the Pope has likewise fallen into disuse. One can acquire them only on certain days at certain shrines, and then only if one can prove that one has completed all constituent parts of the rite: confession and Eucharistic devotion in a given place and on a given day.
- Indulgences can no longer be won on another person's behalf if they are alive but not actively present. Only the deceased can still have indulgences granted on their behalf by the living.

As we can see, this modern form of the indulgence has come quite some way from the original form that developed in the Middle Ages.<sup>6</sup> The question I am concerned with over the next few sections of the article is really *why* indulgences might have come about in the first place. We know that from the early church onwards bishops could reduce or dispense with the rigours of individual penances if the situation moved them to; so why did what was already in practice as discretion need to become so bureaucratized? What purpose did this systematic offering up of absolution serve? Here I identify three particular contexts that help to shed light on these questions: the Crusades, the growth of the saints' cults, and the increasing importance of the non-ascetic population to the expanding church.

### *The Crusades*

Indulgences really took off in the eleventh and twelfth centuries when the idea of purgatory took a widespread hold (Bysted 2015). As we know from Asad's (1993) work, this was a period of great active reform and renewed zealotry for the Western church. It was in the twelfth century that various new orders were founded, and that instructive treatises on the nature of sin and the anatomy of the soul started pouring out of the

monasteries. Against the background of all this scholarship raged the Crusades, which had begun in 1096.

This project to re-take the Holy Lands demanded loyalty and servitude to a cause on an unprecedented scale for Christianity. Up until the Crusades, Christians had only had experience of persecution, upon which martyrdoms were established. But martyrdom functioned by embracing the passive position of prey, a position denied to the predatory mode of crusader. Popes and prelates could not rely merely on small communities of disciplined men to fight these wars; they needed to go beyond the cloister. Asad (1993) writes at length about a class of knightly monks who had known sexual love and war and had to discipline themselves for celibacy. But he does not mention that many knights were induced to participate in religious crusades in the first place because they were offered 'full remission of sins', the first indulgences, in exchange for this participation. While early forms of indulgences existed before the First Crusade, this movement stimulated the papacy's expansion of their use (Harris 1999; Schaffern 1992). The rise of the indulgence as a bureaucratized form thus coincides with a need to harness the capacities of a swathe of men who had never known the cloister, and whose inner dispositions were, at a fair guess, more loosely formed.

### *Saints' cults*

It was also in this zealous period that the cult of the saints really took off. As Peter Brown (1982) has shown, the relationship between saint and worshipper replicated the bonds of patronage and kinship that lubricated flows of goods and favours in late antique society, enabling Christianity to embed itself into the mundane lives of followers. With the growth and popularity of saints, Western Europe's sacred topography was also significantly altered. 'Christianity had a genius for impinging with gusto on the late Roman landscape', writes Brown (1982: 8). Through the cult of the saints, non-places were turned into places, outsides came inside, and non-towns (cemeteries) were made within town walls. In Western Europe, therefore, the power of the bishop grew symbiotically with the power of the shrine:

The bishop's residence and his main basilica still lay within the city walls. Yet it was through a studiously articulated relationship with great shrines that lay at some distance from the city... that the bishops of the former cities of the Roman Empire rose to prominence in early medieval Europe (Brown 1982: 8).

The establishment of saints' cults and, consequently, the increase in pilgrimage to saintly shrines and tombs worked exponentially to enrich and empower the church. The sheer movement of bodies across land that pilgrimage promoted, the vast traffic and opportunity for contact, trade, entertainment, and spiritual contagion this provided, was unparalleled by any other technology in these times. Looked at this way, the rise of saints' cults was not just about spirituality, it was also a technology of cosmic encompassment. That is, saints' cults – properly cannibalized – had the capacity to garner maximum 'converts' (of a range of interior dispositions) with minimal clerical input.

Although bishops reportedly worried about the effects on the church of baptism without adequate instruction, the institution was nevertheless able to capitalize, both materially and politically, on the spiritual contagion of pilgrimage through the creation of indulgences for visiting newly founded sacred sites, or praying to newly canonized saints (Fulton 2002). As Robert Schaffern (1998) remarks, popes and bishops were more

likely to grant indulgences to promote the cult of newly canonized saints than to grant them for shrines built in honour of long-venerated martyrs or apostles. To give an example of such an indulgence, in 1309 Pope Clement V presided at the translation of the relics of the (relatively) newly canonized St Bertrand of Comminges and granted, in Schaffern's words, an 'unusually liberal indulgence' (1998: 645) consisting of the following:

- Fifteen years and fifteen quarantines (forty days) to those who visit the sanctuary on the day of the feast.
- Seven years and seven quarantines to those who visited during the octave (the eight days following a feast).
- Ten years and ten quarantines to those who visited on a Marian feast.
- Three years and three quarantines to those who visited during the octave of these feasts.

*The non-ascetic population and the expanding church*

Between the eleventh and thirteenth centuries the ecclesiastical and secular authorities encouraged pilgrimage as a noble endeavour for all elements of society save one – the monastic community. As the medievalist scholar Josie Campbell writes:

Although the religious hierarchy was aware of the spiritual benefits that accrued from taking part in a pilgrimage, they feared the temptations of the road and the threat to monastic discipline posed by pilgrimage . . . Monks and nuns could take part in pilgrimages but only after receiving the permission of their superiors (Campbell 1986: 101).

The point we can take from this is that the bulk of these indulgences promoting new sources of sanctity through pilgrimage and devotion to the saints were aimed not at ascetic populations, not at those with highly disciplined, well-cultivated Christian dispositions, but at the general non-ascetic public. And again, this links the rise of the indulgence as a bureaucratized form not to Christianity's acceptance (in the sense of inner conversion) in people's hearts, but to its project for rapid, political, expansion across the world – regardless of people's hearts.

Even from a twenty-first-century perspective it is obvious that rigorous self-discipline and soul searching takes up time. Busy secular 'moderns' working long hours perceive it as a struggle to find time to pray and meditate, to go to the gym, to volunteer for charities, or to take up courses and go on retreats that will develop their own self-understandings. In medieval Europe, spiritual self-discipline was clearly up there with scholarship as an elite pursuit for not everyone had the time (or resources) for it. And I think it is fair to hypothesize that as the church became more politically influential, as the institution grew and the stakes got higher, the question of how to encourage the allegiance of the non-ascetic Christian population – the population with less time for spiritual discipline – became a more pressing one.

We should note that the indulgence was always a multi-faceted technology, successful precisely because it could operate at so many scales. Medieval indulgences were at once coextensive with secular systems of charitable distribution, even as they could play on individual quests for piety (see Swanson 2007). Failing that, they could work mechanically like 'dead zones' on grounds of simple maths. At the institutional level, indulgences were routinized for the raising of large sums of revenue, and thus we can (and, indeed, as social scientists, *should*) read them as a means to an end as well as a potential end in themselves.

The indulgence had its roots in the particular historical circumstances of the Crusades, the growing popularity of saints' cults, and the need to exert control over the growing urban masses. This makes it part of the institution of Catholicism itself, part of an overall choreography spanning the Crusades, the Reformation, and, in the twentieth century, Vatican II. Although the indulgence still exists, it is no longer central to most Catholics' religious practice. But this is not to say that other techniques of leniency, formal and informal, are not still in evidence. The essence of mercy, of leniency, the mechanical distribution of merit and forgiveness, continues to be institutionalized and informally authorized in many contemporary Catholic practices. A striking example is to be found in this potted history, by Dona Nena, an elderly informant from northeast Brazil, of slippages surrounding Catholic remembrance of the Crucifixion.

Now we don't make any sacrifices [on Good Friday]. When I grew up, the mirrors were covered, you could not wash, or even lie down during the day. Now no one does that. In my grandmother's house there was no drinking and we ate nothing all day. Not even fish. When I got married the priest told us not to cover the mirrors, and that we should eat in moderation . . . simple food. No meat. These days you go over there [to the local council] to receive your quota of fish. Some people even eat chicken. A person could sleep all day and no one is going to say anything bad.

If one were to produce a schematized version of Dona Nena's narrative combined with data that I have gathered elsewhere on this topic, it would look like a series of commutations occurring gradually over the past hundred years or more, possibly gaining speed from the 1960s onwards, in the wake of Vatican II:

- Earlier mandate is a complete fast in remembrance of the Crucifixion every Friday. Later commuted to not eating meat on Fridays.
- Earlier mandate not to eat meat on Fridays is later commuted to a single complete fast, once a year on Good Friday.
- Good Friday complete fast is later commuted to abstaining from meat on Good Friday.
- Abstaining from meat on Good Friday is eventually commuted to abstaining only from certain types of meat. Beef and pork not allowed. Chicken is acceptable, some say, others disagree. Fish is allowed. Good Friday becomes all about fish.
- Abstinence from alcohol on Good Friday is commuted to not drinking cane spirits. Red wine is allowed.
- Good Friday wearing of black and covering up of mirrors in the house is abandoned altogether.

Practices associated with pilgrimage, it could be said, have also witnessed a loosening of certain rules. Of course there are pockets of specialized movements within Catholicism where the reverse is true, but in many quarters there has been a general decrease in the level of discomfort it is appropriate to put oneself through. When pilgrims to Fatima in Portugal walk for stretches across hard concrete ground on their knees, the discomfort they endure in the process is the offering up of sacrifice. Variations of this practice may include walking barefoot, lengthy prostrations, and even, though rarely, self-flagellation. Knee-walking is particularly common and the home-fashioned knee-pads that pilgrims often sport (see Fig. 1) are clearly aimed at preventing the knees from bleeding and hence protecting the promise-payer from suffering an excess of pain. Knee-pads thus constitute such a spontaneous vernacular technology of leniency, and the fact that there is no attempt to hide them suggests, I think, that leniency is the





**Figure 1.** Fatima, Portugal. Woman pilgrim walks on knees aided by knee-pads. (Marmaduke St John/Alamy Stock Photo.)

more dominant principle at work. Indeed, upon asking people why some pilgrims wore knee-pads, the answer I usually received was ‘Because God is more’ (*Porque Deus é mais*) and ‘God understands’ (*Deus entende*).

The Brazilian Catholics I knew viewed God as, above all, a forgiving God, and often viewed the outward expressions of piety performed by their Protestant Evangelical brethren as distastefully earnest. As Dona Leeta, the woman in a black dress whom we met in the opening paragraph of this article, explained during an interview:

Those *crentes*, well, they think they’re saved and that’s the thing I can’t accept. They say Catholics are too relaxed, never go to church, that they do not know the Bible and all. But at least the Catholic never assumes that he is saved. Never. That is the worst sin. God is more, only He knows who is saved!

Is Dona Leeta’s defence of ‘relaxed’ Catholicism a vernacularization of discipline, a performance of pious humility, or an assertion in favour of lenience? Are comfort-seeking Catholics still recognizably Christian at all? It is certainly true that over the

course of the last century and a half, ordinary Catholics in Northeast Brazil have been witness to a gradual loosening of rules, or, at least, a gradual move away from collective outward ritual expressions of piety. Such a move has arguably been accompanied by an increase in the value attributed to private, individual forms of prayer and interior self-cultivation, practices that intersect with the Catholic Church's secularizing sensibility. Nevertheless, the point remains that leniency and tacit accommodation to practices that, put bluntly, are less demanding of human physical and affective energy have always been and remain, even today, important features of the Catholic religious landscape.

Returning to my point about the anthropology of religion having become somewhat earnest, I ask what would happen if, instead of approaching religion as an ongoing series of ethical equivocations located at the level of the individual, we looked more closely at some of its mechanistic technologies as curious affordances; pockets of leniency in a cosmic framework of boundless demand. Whether routinizing dynamics are imposed or invited, resisted or welcomed, may be separately debated. The point that interests me here is that 'mechanistic' forms of being a Christian – blessings and remissions purchased with money, or accessed via sacramental rites held to be 'automatic' – have always been available to Catholics, and this fact has allowed Catholic identity to evolve certain contours: the identity of the lapsed being one of them.

### The quasi-magical sacrament

From divisions of spiritual labour implied by the concept of laity to the mathematical gains of indulgence, I shall end by returning to the category of the lapsed. At the start of this article I asked why Catholics were more likely to lapse than Protestants, and here I want to proffer the beginnings of an answer linked to another important technology: Catholic baptism. Baptism, like all Catholic sacraments, is a rite designed for the efficacious channelling of grace into the world. The church teaches that the effect of a sacrament comes *ex opera operato* by the very fact of being administered, regardless of the attitude of the person receiving it or the personal holiness of the minister administering it.<sup>7</sup> The notion of *ex opera operato*, like many Catholic teachings, remains a classical source of tension and qualification for Catholics keen to distance it from any concept of 'magic'. In official terms, the fruitful operation of *ex opera operato* depends wholly upon the recipient being properly disposed (in other words, it should not be classed as a mechanical operation), but I think it fair to say that the 'quasi-magical' potentiality embedded in the Catholic idea of the sacrament remains obliquely significant in many lay Catholic contexts. As a sacramental rite, baptism, like ordination to the Catholic priesthood, ontologically alters the person and is thus impossible to reverse. According to the Catechism of the Catholic Church, baptism 'seals the Christian with the indelible spiritual mark of belonging to Christ. No sin can erase this mark, even if sin prevents baptism from bearing the fruits of salvation'.<sup>8</sup> A baptized soul may fail to live up to high moral expectations, or may live up to them for a period before departing from the faith, but the fact of his or her baptism remains. The subtle implications of this, for kinship, tradition, and for indexing other aspects of a person's identity, are remarkable.

In Simon Coleman's study of middle-class English visitors to Walsingham, described by him as 'relatively disengaged, agnostic "Christians"', accounts of pilgrimage 'lack a self-consciously coherent stance to ritual or religion' (2014: s287). In his informants' accounts, what is revealed is Catholicism's metonymical connection with childhood, with parental boundaries of expectation, with memory and the circularity of time. Coleman's informants remind me of a British friend of mine: a warm and outgoing

'lapsed Catholic' in her forties who, despite her proclaimed atheism and long-time lack of church attendance, had her two sons baptized in the Catholic Church. Recounting the irony of this baptismal event one day, she paused, reflected, and confessed: 'It was because of my mother I did it. I don't care about the church y'know, but I could feel my mother turning in her grave and I had to, for her sake'. By engaging with the church in this way, we could say that my friend was activating a kind of dormant code embedded in the long-ago fact of her own baptism. Baptizing her boys turned out to be an expression of love for an ancestor rather than an act of submission to God, but it was possible because, although lapsed, she had been baptized *ex opera operato*, and thus remained, essentially, Catholic herself.

## Conclusion

The question arises: how can we justify placing indifference and indistinction under the anthropological lens? Why place indifferent non-believers in conversation with committed and engaged believers? Why consider the 'lapsed' Catholic in terms of 'religion' at all? For many reasons, I would answer. Following Danièle Hervieu-Léger's (2008) wider argument about the links between religion and 'chains of memory', and recent discussions of 'religion as heritage' (Kaell 2017; Oliphant 2015), notions of lapsedness offer potentially different angles on the relationship between ritual, kinship, identity, and time. As Coleman suggests, much of interest is revealed when we focus our ethnographic gaze 'away from the most obvious centres of religious action', when we 'move away from core, "hard" ritual practices and toward apparent ritual and aesthetic peripheries' (2014: s290).

The challenge, as I see it, is not to assume a concept such as 'lapsedness' to be the product of an ever-increasing tendency towards secularism, but to inquire how it might have emerged as a living Christian form. As well as asking why people fall away from Catholicism, we should be asking how and in what contexts Catholicism allows fallers to return. What allows Catholicism to hold the committed and the indifferent within its single embrace? By this I do not mean to imply that the category 'lapsed' is always and everywhere the same kind of thing, nor even that one only finds lapsed Catholics. My point is merely that we have not looked enough at this class of 'religious' subject and that, until we do, we could be missing out on an important interpretative link.

The history of the indulgence could easily be turned into one about monastic thinking on the ethics of indebtedness, but I think it can serve a more useful purpose at this juncture. It can remind us that the promotion of lenience through disciplinary shortcuts, far from threatening the church, has worked in its favour.

I suspect that it is precisely to indulgences, as well as to myriad other technologies of leniency, that we must attend if we want to understand how it is that Catholicism remains, according to so many standard statistical calculations, the largest Christian denomination in the world.<sup>9</sup> We need to look to the indulgence but also well beyond it, to other histories of legal exception and ecclesiastical compromise. In short, we need more study of the religious crevices: mitigating contexts, lapsed identities, and clauses written into canon law that afford compromise. This is a large task, too large for one article, but it is a task I hope that more of us will take up, not least because, in my view, a deeper understanding of lenience is useful well beyond the anthropology of religion. After all, if discipline and lenience constitute the very chips upon which governments and leaderships, economic regimes and other large institutions, stand and fall, we need a better understanding of them. If the power to sentence is also the power to absolve,

or to define the state of exception (Agamben 2005), the power to look is surely also the power to *look away* and ignore. As such, the lenience and lapsedness that so often go hand in hand with structures of discipline deserve our attention.

## NOTES

This article has benefited from the generosity of many colleagues, particularly from extensive conversations with Kristin Norget and Valentina Napolitano, my co-editors on the *The anthropology of Catholicism: a reader*, as well as with Andreas Bandak, Magnus Course, and Diego Malara about the nature and anthropology of the Catholic Church. I would also like to acknowledge the many helpful comments I received on earlier versions of this article at the 2016 University of Cambridge, Anthropology of Christianity Conference, and at the 2015 University of Edinburgh, Christianity and Discipline Workshop. Many thanks also to the two anonymous *JRAI* reviewers who helped me to sharpen my arguments

<sup>1</sup> All names used are pseudonyms.

<sup>2</sup> When anthropologists such as Fenella Cannell (2006), Susan Harding (2001), and Joel Robbins (2003) brought Christianity into focus several years ago, one of the effects of their scholarship was to create a brand-new lens through which to analyse Christianity and its various practices. This 'Christianity lens' was further cut and polished in ethnographic contexts where Protestant Evangelical churches and Pentecostal forms of Christianity were on the rise. Thanks to the rapid growth of Pentecostal and charismatic Christianity and the subsequent splurge of studies on it, notions of interior belief, sincerity, rupture, and the workings of charisma through the body became passionate sources of academic debate (Hann 2007; Robbins 2003; 2007; Robbins & Engelke 2010). This passionate academic debate must be understood, in the first instance, in relation to the passion of these (largely) Pentecostal converts, whose psychic energy and time commitment to Christianity needed, from a social science perspective, to be explained.

<sup>3</sup> According to the Online Etymological Dictionary (<http://www.etymonline.com/>), lapsed, from the Latin *lapsare*, 'to lose one's footing, slip, slide', was originally used to denote a passing of time/slippage of memory, a forfeiture or moral transgression. It only started to denote 'a falling away from one's faith' circa 1650.

<sup>4</sup> I use the term 'technology' after the philosopher Jacques Ellul, who defines it as 'the totality of methods rationally arrived at and having absolute efficiency [for a given stage of development] in every field of human activity' (Ellul 1964: xxv). By 'technology', I allude also to Foucault's understanding of the human institution as a 'tightly knit grid of material coercions' in which we are all embedded as 'objects of power' (1980: 104).

<sup>5</sup> For more detail on Catholic practices in this region, see Mayblin (2010).

<sup>6</sup> See Catholic website for more information: <http://prayerbook.com/Subjects/indulgen.htm#PRIMER> (last accessed 23 May 2017).

<sup>7</sup> Catechism of the Catholic Church 1131.

<sup>8</sup> Catechism of the Catholic Church 1272. See also Beal, Hames, Coriden & Green (2000: 63), who note that even those who have joined another religion, have become atheists or agnostics, or have been excommunicated remain Catholics. Excommunicates lose rights, such as the right to the sacraments, but they are still bound to the obligations of the law through the fact of baptism.

<sup>9</sup> For example, according to Pew Research on Religion and Public Life (<http://www.pewresearch.org/>), Roman Catholicism is the largest Christian group in the world today with more than a billion followers, constituting about half of the world's Christian population.

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## Non pratiquants et laïques : discipline et indulgence dans l'étude de la religion

### Résumé

Le présent article met en garde contre la « posture sérieuse » qu'adopte l'anthropologie de la religion, qui a tendance à exagérer le rôle de la discipline dans la construction du sujet religieux par rapport aux mécanismes d'indulgence et de compromis. Prenant l'exemple de l'Église catholique, l'auteure montre comment discipline et indulgence ont construit ensemble les subjectivités chrétiennes, composant des mouvements différents d'une chorégraphie complexe et gigantesque dont l'évolution s'étire sur plusieurs siècles. En examinant certaines techniques d'indulgence qui sont apparues au cours de l'histoire du catholicisme, elle retrace une généalogie alternative du « moi chrétien ». Dans celle-ci, la croissance, le pouvoir et la survie de l'institution dépendaient non seulement de la formation de corps et d'esprits disciplinés mais aussi d'une division du travail soigneusement gérée entre clercs et laïcs et d'une batterie de commutations judiciaires et d'évitements pratiques visant à réduire les efforts et l'inconfort de l'approche ascétique. En s'appuyant sur le concept « d'abandon de la pratique », l'auteure demande dans quelle mesure le « catholique non pratiquant », au lieu d'être l'indice d'une tendance croissante à la sécularisation, ne pourrait pas être déjà compris au sein d'une forme religieuse vivante et évolutive.

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